

# RISK COMMUNICATION

## ISSUE SUMMARY:

EPA is responsible for sharing critical information on how we are addressing human health and environmental risks and what those risks are with the American public, communities, public officials and other stakeholders in a way that it is: (1) tailored to their needs, (2) reaches as wide an audience as possible, and (3) provides meaningful, understandable, and actionable information on reducing risk.

Over the past decade it has become increasingly clear that risk communication is deeply connected to the agency's success with a wide range of topics, hazards, and audiences. Ultimately, the EPA's ability to protect human health and the environment relies on our ability to communicate effectively to many diverse audiences on a wide range of complicated issues.

However, currently risk communication at the agency is a somewhat siloed activity where risk communicators are not always well connected to best practices from the field, quality training opportunities, or agencywide efforts underway to improve risk communication. In addition, the agency does not yet have a good way to leverage recent findings from research into better risk communication practice. Finally, there are several intractable risk communication problems across the agency that would benefit from sustained focus by highly trained staff who are able to apply best practices backed by research.

In FY19 and FY20 the EPA OIG identified risk communication as an agency management challenge and identified instances across water, air, land and pesticide programs where the EPA needs more effective risk communication strategies to guide, coordinate and evaluate its communication efforts to convey potential hazards. In their statement they recognized that EPA has taken steps to improve risk communication but state that EPA leadership needs to demonstrate an organizational commitment to develop strategic goals, objectives, and management controls to address risk communication so that the public can take action to protect itself from hazards.

Addressing these issues and meeting the challenges of the future will require creating sustained culture change, building agency knowledge and a robust community of practice, and developing strong relationships with the academic community and our federal, state, and tribal partners.

## BACKGROUND:

In order to build a consistent and effective approach to risk communication across the agency, the Administrator hired a senior risk communication advisor in November 2019 who is responsible for coordinating risk communication across the agency. The senior risk communications advisor is assigned to the Office of Public Affairs in order to be centrally located and strategically placed to connect across our offices and regions and most directly with outreach and communication efforts at the agency. The advisor is supported by the work of 1.25 additional FTEs.

With the new advisor now in place, EPA's strategy to improve risk communication includes developing a risk communication framework and a set of robust tools to be used by anyone who communicates risk on behalf of the agency. In addition, a critical element of this strategy is to provide agencywide training grounded in the science of risk communication which leverages research across the fields of social, behavioral, and management science. This training is key to meeting EPA's risk communication challenges of the future and will be targeted to a broad spectrum of managers and staff across our HQ and regional offices, and across job classifications (e.g., environmental engineers, environmental protection specialists, scientists, public affairs specialists, etc.).

#### *Agency Activities Over the Past Year:*

- Coordinating risk communication activities across the agency - To increase coordination across the agency, EPA is continuing to use its Risk Communications Workgroup, which now includes over 80 participants, to connect people across the agency who work in this area and use their programmatic knowledge and expertise in building new risk communication tools.
- Developing a research-based framework and key risk communication tools - To help ensure consistency in the way the agency conducts risk communication, EPA is developing a "SALT" framework based on a process of **S**trategy, **A**ction, **L**earning and **T**ools, that together will provide a research-based approach and best practices for all employees to use in communicating our work to the American people. The agency has also begun work to develop a set of risk communication toolkits on emerging and cross-cutting contaminants.
- Providing agencywide training - In FY 2020, EPA began working with COMPASS Science Communication, one of the nation's leading organizations in the field of science communication, to provide evidence-based risk communication training across the agency, and build a network of staff in EPA HQ and regional offices who are well positioned to apply their risk communication expertise in the agency's day to day work. This project was developed with a significant agency investment of \$230,000, which has allowed EPA to work with established leaders to develop a scientifically grounded, environmental hazards-specific risk communication curriculum that will meet our diverse risk communication needs.

#### MOVING FORWARD:

Over the next two years, EPA will continue the important work of improving the quality and consistency of our risk communication with the American public by focusing on three key areas, including:

- Significantly expanding training across the agency and with our partners, to create a community of practice and advance a risk communication knowledge network in a meaningful and sustainable way: This will increase the number of staff at the agency and among our partners who are using the same best practices in their risk communication efforts while at the same time building a network of staff located across all regions and offices who are well-positioned to share their risk communication expertise.

- Launching an internal risk communication fellowship program to increase EPA's progress on the our most difficult risk communication issues: The fellowship program will be open to EPA employees and will provide 2.5 months of intensive risk communication study and training followed by 2.5-3.5 months where the fellow would apply the knowledge gained to an intractable risk communication problem facing the home office or region.
- Developing academic partnerships to study EPA's risk communication challenges and improve the agency's reliance on evidence-based practices. This includes increasing research partnerships to develop a research portfolio with the explicit goal of studying EPA-relevant risk communication questions, and then translating findings into usable tools, applications, and best practices for use across the agency.

The EPA's FY22 OMB Budget Submission included a new priority area to support this work with \$1.4 million and an additional 3 FTE.

LEAD OFFICE/REGION: OPA/R9

OTHER KEY OFFICES/REGIONS: ALL NPMS & REGIONS